An Appropriate Piety
March 1, 1970
Matthew 5:14-16; 6:1-18

Somewhere along the line most philosophic approaches to the nature of man fail to be honest. Most philosophies don't really take man seriously and because of this hopelessly underestimate or overestimate his nature and possibilities. Humanism, and there is a lot of it built into the Democratic ideal, never gets around to honestly confronting the fact of human evil. Man, the humanist proposes, will pull himself up by his own boot straps, and if given enough education and freedom will always make the best decisions regarding his own welfare. Fortunately, the founding fathers of this nation were not total humanists and had the good sense to incorporate in our system of government checks and balances. The doctrinaire communist, on the other hand, grossly underestimates and reduces man to one cog in a giant collective entity which operates solely on the basis of economics.

Popular philosophies fail notoriously to confront the incredible complexity of man and his behavior. We are complex. We do a lot of things for reasons we don't understand. Psychoanalysis is not only enlightening but frightening because it reveals some of the reasons we are the way we are - and inevitably we are shocked and perhaps threatened by this deep self-disclosure. We are able to rationalize and justify past behavior. You've done it and so have I. We've done something wrong or foolish or impetuous: it turned out badly. But somehow we are able to excuse it by literally creating the necessary rational out of thin air. We do good things for the wrong reasons and bad things for the right reasons and inside each of us is a labyrinth of motives and feelings and needs that no one totally comprehends and few take very seriously.

Let's take religion, for example. Acts of piety. By this I mean those acts which are generally regarded, at this time and place, as acts of religious devotion and reverence. Some of them are very simple, like praying before meals, or displaying religious art or a Bible prominently in our homes. Dressing up and going to worship is an act of piety; praying before a P.T.A. meeting begins in popular piety. Some of them are very complex. The question is; why do we do them?

There are probably a number of reasons. But one thing is certain, we are able to use them for ego support. Having done something religious - having prayed publicly or gone to church, we feel good about it. And if we are honest with ourselves the thought is going to occur to us that perhaps that's why we did it in the first place. Now, in a sense, that's a very dangerous idea to suggest. Because men who have thought about it very long have usually ended up flagellating themselves in a monastery. One way to live with our complexity, of course, is to never do anything.

Jesus had an agenda for his disciples. He called them to a life of activism and risk. And yet, he was, at the same time, a supreme realist, absolutely honest about man and his nature. When it came to religion and piety he was brutally, offensively frank, cutting through outward behavior to inner motivation.

He lived in a very religious culture. Piety was a way of life, to a degree you and I have difficulty assimlating. A good Jew expressed this piety, or religiosity, mainly in three ways.

The first was alms giving. The good Jew gave a tithe, one tenth of all he had, and on top of that he gave alms for charity and the support of the poor. The tithe was expected: alms were the "icing on the cake". At certain times during the year a trumpet was sounded to signal a special offering. And Jesus had the audacity to suggest that some men were using that occasion for a little public display of generosity. He suggested that the man who was really interested in the poor - and in the will of God will be so secretive about his giving that he will not even allow his left hand to know what the right is doing.

The second major act of piety was prayer. Three times daily, at appointed times, the good Jew stopped what he was doing, turned toward Jerusalem, and prayed, in much the same way as the Moslems do today, or the devout Catholic at the ringing of the Angelus. Jesus suggested that some men were calculating to be on the busiest corner, or in the middle of the market place, at the appointed time. And that their praying was, in fact, an act put on solely for the benefit of the audience. He suggested that the man who is really interested in piety will seek out a place apart, an inner chamber: and there pray to God - who knows what's going on anyway.

Finally, a good Jew fasted as an act of penance and devotion. Fasting was required several times a year. But the truly pious fasted every Monday and Thursday. It was the custom to be very visible about it. To dawn a sack cloth, to smear the face with mud and ashes, to walk about groaning and making noises of agony. Jesus suggested that it was all a show, that these people were actually enjoying their martyrdom, that the goal of that kind of behavior was public recognition: "there goes a good and holy man!" He suggested that appropriate fasting would be totally invisible. "Wash your face", he told them, "appear no differently from everyone else: no one ought to know what you are about but God."

Now, I've resisted the very real temptation to bring these three acts of piety into focus thus far, because it seems to me that it would belabor the obvious. I've been there - many times - and so have you. I've managed to feel very good about my generosity, and to compliment myself on a well turned phrase in public prayer, and I'm absolutely delighted to be caught in my study working through the dinner hour. Jesus knew the nature of man uncomfortably well and you are well equipped to see in your behavior the very kind of thing he was describing.

Some have seen in his position a solid anti-institutionalism. Some have felt that the Church summarizes "piety on display" and that Jesus was actually teaching a totally individualized approach to religion. And if you're looking for a reason not to give - or to stay home on Sunday morning - or to generally avoid the Church - that argument will probably be sufficient. Of course, it is nonsense; just another example of how incredibly maneuverable we are - and that we can undergird laziness, unconcern and apathy with sound intellectual reasoning if we are so disposed. The fact is that Jesus took for granted that his disciples would do these things. They would give alms and pray and fast. There really is no question of whether Jesus would favor church attendance and giving and public prayer. Of course he would. The question - then and now - is, "for what reason?" The hypocrites, as he called them, did these things in order to be seen - and they got their reward. They were seen and applauded. The account was closed. But faith is more than that: life in fellowship with God is the most meaningful, fullest and richest human experience.

That life exists in the area of our will, our motivations. And the man who wants only to be recognized for his piety has seriously short-changed himself.

Jesus got right to the heart of things by being totally honest about the nature of man. What he did not do, and this is the danger in thinking about this passage, was to rule out piety. He did not teach an "invisible discipleship". In fact, if we want to understand this portion of the Sermon on the Mount we must hold up beside it something he said immediately prior. "You are the light of the world. A city set on a hill cannot be hid. Nor do men light a lamp and put it under a bushel, but on a stand, and it gives light to all in the house. Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works and give glory to your father who is in heaven. [Matthew 5:14-16] Now, there is a paradox. "Let your light so shine .... Beware of practicing your piety before men." Discipleship is visible but hidden, both at the same time. How do we resolve it? How do we know what to do conspicuously and what secretively? One suggestion is: "Show when tempted to hide and hide when tempted to show." [Expositors Greek Testament] That, I think, is the crux. That takes seriously our maneuverability. That approach understands our need for ego-support, and our fear of conspiciously doing the will of God.

I think this is a very important passage of scripture for Presbyterians. We, needless to say, are not noted for our piety. In fact, one of the great appeals of Presbyterianism has been that you can be one without being very "religious". We don't flaunt our religiosity: we aren't fanatics, we aren't conspicuous - and we're sinfully proud of it. On the other hand I'm always amused at the way the fundamentalist branch of Protestantism reacts vigorously against Roman Catholic piety and then comes up with a system that is remarkably similar. The man who is most opposed to the Virgin Mary on the dashboard - is the man most likely to sport a "Jesus saves" bumper sticker. If you've ever attended a lengthy prayer meeting you know that repetition in prayer is not a Catholic monopoly. The person most opposed to the rigidity of ecclesiastical ritual, in fact probably has his own liturgy of pious phrases about which he feels very good.

In any case we Presbyterians find ourselves in the middle, uncomfortable with

both traditions, not very pious, and rather glad of it. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, another man who could be disturbingly honest, suggested that "Protestant (and he could have said Presbyterian) modest invisibility is nothing more than conformity to the world." That hurts. That cuts to the quick. That suggests that you and I use this ideology of hidden piety as an excuse for inactivity, - no piety at all. That suggests that what we really want is to be religious without trying, without inconvenience, without risk or cost. Bonhoeffer would say we want Christianity without a cross - which was, after all, a very conspicuous symbol.

The Sermon on the Mount, from which our text is taken, is our Lord's description of the life of discipleship. The Beatitudes - Blessed are the poor in spirit, the meek and merciful, the peacemakers - serve as the preface. This is the Christian life. And then - "let your light so shine." The life in Christ - the life of loving others, serving others, will always be visible. Let it shine! Do what God wills for you to do in a visible way, so that people will glorify and praise God. Jesus knew that it would be risky business. He told them it would cost them dearly. He warned that they would be persecuted for their visibility. But he never said that about piety. Piety offends no one. Christianity lived in the world just may offend everyone, and that is the only piety he ever taught.

That has always been true and it is terribly true for the Christian today. We live in a culture that applauds harmless, selfish piety in much the same way as Jesus' own culture. The world expects us to be visible - so long as we confine our visibility to the going definition of religiosity. That, I feel, is the worst insult. After 2,000 years of Christian history the world still expects the church to be pious in a way that disgusted its Lord. The church can rant and rave about immorality, about the lack of pious symbols in public education, about gambling and liquor, about religious observances or the lack of them - and everyone stands back and applauds. The world expects the clergyman to carry his Bible and baptize every public function with meaningless platitudes; and it's a very tempting game for church and clergyman to play. It's rewards are success and popularity and the accolades of the gallery.

But let the church or the clergyman or the layman tie into that "peacemaking" idea and the cheers turn to scorn; the accolades to disdain; the popularity to persecution. Think about that for a minute in terms of the Black Manifesto, the widening breach across this land between black men and white men; think about that in terms of what the Black Panthers are saying about our way of life and the way in which our system is responding. Is there really any question about when the church - the Christian - the follower of Christ - ought to be? Is it possible to read Matthew 5 and 6 and be content with praying at football games in a state, the Governor of which hands out axe-handles to flaunt his racism?

Now, it goes without saying that the Christian who knows his calling in terms of peace-making: the kind of peace no one is making today, is in for a rough time of it. If he is a pious man in order to be applauded, he's going to pocket his wallet and head for the nearest exit. We're not talking anymore about a comfortable Christianity and a popular piety. Jesus ruled that out a long time ago.

We are talking about Christian discipleship and an appropriate piety. This is the life to which we are called. Whatever we do religiously is for God's glory and his will, a will which was laid bare in the life of Jesus Christ.

Jesus was terribly honest about man and his complexity. He taught a new and appropriate piety that might well be described in terms of "hiding when we feel like showing, and showing when we are tempted to run for cover." But he did more than teach. He lived that life and so loved those about him that they felt themselves becoming new men - real men, for the first time. He died for them: for us. And what we need to see, in the midst of this discussion of piety, is that death lost that battle; that the power of God himself is with us and on our side when we follow him: that the greatest joy life offers is to be his people - his body on earth; to grow and to become the kind of men and women God created us to be.

That's what this game of life is all about - an appropriate piety.

Amen.

There is a lot going on out there that frightens us, our father. And it is tempting to feel very good about our piety. Forgive us. And grant us the power of the Risen Christ to follow wherever he leads. Amen.